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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the almost story as a story that overwhelms the author but does not wholly come across to the reader. It is a story that simultaneously excites and disappoints, intrigues and frustrates. Several teaching suggestions for helping students turn an almost story into a story are given, including encouraging students to experiment with character, to refeel the vision of the story, and to carefully revise the plot of the story. (TS)

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THE ALMOST STORY

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The almost story often occurs to a student like a Batman episode: FLASH! BANG! VOILA! The makings of a great story! The student can't wait to jot it down, and gets up in the middle of the night, or pulls his bicycle over to the curb, or jots notes in the margin of his history book.

Afterwards, in note form, it doesn't look at all like the magnificent vision it had seemed. But no matter--it'll look better in story form. And it does, somewhat.

I'm not talking about the total wipe-out, the absolutely lifeless prose, the pathetic non-story we see now and them. By the term "the almost story" I mean one with a fine idea, a new twist, a game worth playing. The writer finds it perhaps as a newspaper clipping, a startling fact, a scene flashed on his imagination by a mental slide projector. It occurs to him as a static tableau--one which is stunning enough, all right, a vivid confrontation with a truth in the teeming total context of his personal life. But of course he won't be able to put all of his own life into the story.

And there's the problem: by itself, the vision would likely make a terrific surrealistic painting, moody water color, or pastel portrait. But exactly as it occurs to him, it isn't a story. Eager to get it down, though, he skims through the basic plot of a story to get to his one great scene. And why not? That's why he's writing the story in the first place.

But he may be in too big a hurry; he takes few pains creating vivid details of character, motivation, conflict development. And then he marvels in pained disbelief when his fellow students don't share the impact of his precious key scene (which he often feels compelled to point out to us and which, he will often insist, <u>really</u> happened! Was a vital moment in his life! Was a traumatic, apocalyptic vision!)

Sometimes, he goes on to explain the story in class. When he does, when he gives the connecting links, strangely enough, when with passionate details he makes the story come alive around his key scene, he gives us a glimpse of a powerful gripping story.

"Write that one!" we say to him.

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"But that's what I wrote," he protests warily.

If he believes that we truly care about his story, it's a matter of showing him step by step what was omitted, where we failed to see his characters struggling, where aspects of plot or physical setting need development.

For the almost story is--to me as a reader--one well worth saving: it makes me want to see more; it excites, but disappoints; it intrigues, but frustrates; moves me even though I see the puppeteer clumsily, too hastily jerking the strings toward that one scene which means so much to him.

The crucial fact such an almost writer has to learn is that he must turn his single-slide projector into a movie projector. Only when he does, only after he absorbs us in the building action, pulls us into the suspense, makes us believe that there is life in the story because we <u>see</u> it and are <u>there</u>--only then when we come upon his favorite crucial scene will it flash for us, as it did originally for him.

Show, don't tell, we say over and again. But he finds that's hard to do all the way through an entire story, especially when all he had in mind was a fantastic epiphany, a terrific scene.

Everybody has "great ideas" for stories. But few take delight in work, in breathing life into every line of words, which seem to <u>prefer</u> to remain as dead letters. But technique--which Dylan Thomas called "the painful, voluntary work"--is that barrage of details which <u>render</u> the reader through an experience.

Rendering the reader through an experience so that he's changed by it--like rendering a hog. At Texas Tech, few students except an occasional aggie major know what I mean by rendering a hog. Butcher him, trim off the fat, dump it in a pot and melt it down for hog lard. They don't understand the whole process of rendering a hog, then, but they get the idea that after a hog has been rendered through that experience, somehow he's never quite the same again.

Roughly, that's what should happen to a reader. The writer of an almost story must learn that he--the writer himself--must first go through this rendering experience,--if he expects it to happen to the reader. That is, he has to get into his story, stage, dramatize, excite each scene into life. If he has rushed too skimpily (six months ago I could have said "streaked") to get to his big scene, he needs to go back and re-feel his vision, re-imagine it, write his way toward it one page at a time.

Sometimes that's enough advice. I've seen some fine revisions that way. Othertimes, the writer needs to question his entire scheme, his basic intention. He needs the old starters: "what would happen if...? then what? why?"

He needs to open up to the possibilities, to relax his hold on the precious bird of his vision. If it's a true vision, it won't fly away. He needs to give himself options, alternatives, breathing room for his characters and the potential details of their conflicts. He might need to experiment, to free wheel, to wrench a character out of context, even stand the situation entirely on its head, and see what surfaces.

As an old pilot, I believe firmly in flight plans, notes, even outlines. But I tell my students also--and I believe it intensely--that part of the discovery comes in the very act of writing--some of the best parts "unfold" as you follow your lead. Write; immerse yourself with faith in the waters of discovery. Don't be so quick to turn twenty, if you're only eighteen. Don't be so impatient to rush to the scene of vision, if your original tableau is worth a story at all. Go through the entire ordeal. You'll find yourself discovering vivid and ingenious details you never knew were in you. Robert Frost said it: "Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing."

That's what the writer of more than just an almost story has to believe--even if the typewriter's well, before he sits down to it, seems dry. Tell him there are more fresh springs of details than are dreamed of in his plodding consciousness.

I'm not talking about "automatic writing"; not at all. Rather, the thrill of working hard at a story, with diligent technique, and taking the time to <u>discover</u> some of its most exciting parts. Edward Albee told us at Tech last year, "A writer is someone who's trying to discover what he means."

Robert Frost's famous dictum makes sense to the almost writer who finally lets himself be rendered through his own developing story (or poem). Frost said, "It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it."

Strangely enough, a writer who truly gets into his story sometimes discovers that his initial image or tableau is no longer the crucial scene, may, in extreme cases, no longer even fit. I've had three students discover that already this semester. If they've truly followed one story line where it best seemed to go, rather than merely changing horses in mid-stream because the old ones slowed down, I tell them not to be afraid to let go of precious parts, even the original germinal insights, if they stand in the way of the proper story. Hold on to a friend with all you've got; but in fiction, sacrifice anything that doesn't serve you. Sacrifice characters, pet phrases, the time element, the ending--anything.

I like Frost's other saying, also: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting."

James M. Barrie's Peter Pan is a familiar example of what the reader has to do--to believe in the fiction as the children believed in Tinker Bell and thus let her live.

Thomas Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49 gives a metaphor for what the almost writer must do. If you've read it, you remember that Mrs. Oedipa Maas encounters the Nefastic Machine, theoretically a perpetual motion machine with a tiny intelligence inside, sort of a Tinker Bell, known as "Maxwell's Demon." Maxwell's Demon supposedly sits inside the box ready to sort fast molecules from slow ones to produce heat and therefore piston energy. But only a sensitive human being who believes in the Demon and concentrates can activate it. Otherwise, the Demon doesn't work, and the machine isn't energized. Oedipa tries, but fails. The pistons remain static, in a state of entropy, like society itself, as Oedipa sees it.

An almost story is like the Nefastis Machine. It needs a writer to imagine the tiny intelligence within the box, to believe it into life, to invent details that will make dead letters stand up and cast real shadows, to excite inert tableaux into activity, with an energy capable of rendering a reader through a world that otherwise never exists.

When I first came to Pynchon's novel, I had to look up what he meant by entropy, so let me quote one definition: "entropy: the ultimate state reached in the degradation of the matter and energy of the universe: state of inert uniformity of component elements: absense of form and pattern."

Entropy: that's what the initial vision is--a tableau, a slide picture, rather than a movie--an idea, not a story.

The almost writer's task is to energize and excite every scene, every connecting bit of narrative. To excite: here's a good definition of that term. "To raise an atom, a molecule, or other particle to a higher energy level (as by heating, irradiation, or bombardment). For example, "Radiation excites and ionizes the atoms of material through which it passes."

Or, we might say to a student, "Imagination excites and animates the plot through which it passes."

Or better, "Details excite the idea, the scene, the vision which the writer of an almost story first began with."

The enemy of an almost writer is entropy, a collection of inert words, a story which doesn't move. He needs an exciter, an energy that runs from here to there, from paragraph to paragraph, a cumulative series of details so vivid we can't help but be rendered through the experience of the story; to be melted down by it; to believe, because we have seen; and somehow, never to be the same again.